

Missouri, Powder on endangered list

By CLAIR JOHNSON
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The Missouri River topped the list of the nation's most endangered rivers as identified by American Rivers today in its annual review of the country's waterways. Also endangered is the Powder River in Wyoming and Montana.

With its headwaters at Three Forks in Western Montana, the nation's longest river flows 2,500 miles to the Mississippi River just north of St. Louis.

American Rivers, a national nonprofit conservation organization, said the Missouri, or "Big Muddy," faces the most immediate, serious environmental degradation this year because of dam operations by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Several species could become extinct unless the Corps changes dam operations to mimic more natural flows in the Missouri, the river group said.

The Powder River is fifth on this year's list because of threats from coal bed methane development in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming and Montana. American Rivers said discharges of large volumes of generally salty groundwater, a byproduct of drilling for methane found in coal seams, into the Powder or its tributaries could threaten the river and its fish species.

Chad Smith, director of the Missouri field office of American Rivers, said this is the seventh straight year the Missouri has been on the endangered list, which the group has been issuing for about 15 years.

Later this summer, the Corps will be releasing for public comment a new alternative for the Missouri River Master Water Control Manual, which is the guidebook that the agency uses to manage the

operations on its six main stem dams in Montana and the Dakotas.

Smith said American Rivers hopes the Missouri's listing will make the public aware that this is an important chance for the river. "And it may be the last chance for changing how the dams are operated," he said.

In Montana, changing operations at the Fort Peck dam would improve recreation at the reservoir, the group said.

Smith said recreation concerns of Fort Peck Reservoir users are not factored into dam management. "Fort Peck is managed for barges," he said. Public comment on the Corps' revised manual will be an opportunity to make sure recreation is given equal weight with navigation, he said.

American Rivers wants the Corps to modify dam operations to include modestly higher water levels in the spring and lower levels in the summer as recommended by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in November.

The FWS issued a "jeopardy" finding in its biological opinion, which means that the least tern, piping plover and pallid sturgeon are likely to go extinct along the Missouri unless the Corps changes its dam operations. The service proposed alternatives to help recover those species, including releasing more water in the spring and reducing water in the summer to resemble more natural flows of the river.

Historically, increased spring flows cued the federally endangered pallid sturgeon to spawn. And receding waters in the summer exposed sandbars, which provided nesting grounds for the federally endangered least tern and threatened piping plover.

Today, the Corps operates its dams to provide a steady flow almost year-round for barges on the

lower river. Dams and channels built over the last 70 years have changed the river from meandering channels, thousands of sandbars and flood plain habitat to a deeper, faster and more stable canal for barges.

“The Corps continues to run the Missouri River to benefit a handful of barges,” said American Rivers’ President Rebecca Wodder. “It is time to prevent species extinction, tap the Missouri’s great economic potential for recreation and tourism and meet the modern needs of riverside communities.”

American Rivers said the Missouri has never lived up to expectations as a commercial waterway. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Corps, the Missouri barges carry only 0.3 percent of all the grain harvested in Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri and produce \$6.9 million in economic benefits.

“I wouldn’t quibble with their numbers,” said Paul Johnston, a spokesman for the corps’ Northwestern Division in Omaha. “But, what gets lost here is that it’s not up to the Corps of Engineers to stop supporting navigation. It’s an authorized purpose, along with all other purposes Congress authorized. It isn’t a bunch of guys sitting around a table saying, ‘Let’s build some dams and straighten this thing out.’ ”

Re-creating more natural flows would boost the economies of riverside communities. The organization said boating, fishing, hunting, camping, hiking, bird watching and other forms of recreation generate nearly \$90 million a year in economic activity in communities along the Missouri.

The Powder River, which begins in Wyoming and flows north into Eastern Montana where it joins the Yellowstone River, is at risk from too much poor quality water produced by coal bed methane drilling, the group said.

This year, the Bureau of Land Management in Wyoming is conducting a draft environmental impact

statement for coal bed methane in the Powder River Basin. The document will estimate the cumulative effect of about 51,000 coalbed methane wells on the environment in northeastern Wyoming over the next 10 years and will propose alternatives for reducing environmental damage.

American Rivers said the public will have an opportunity to comment on the draft assessment. "It will be critical for citizens to review the document and contact public officials at the local, state and federal levels to voice support for alternatives that offer the most protection for the Powder River, its tributaries and the arid landscape of northeast Wyoming," the group said.

The Powder River Basin ecosystem of sagebrush and mixed-grass prairie supports elk, mule deer, antelope, bobcat and swift fox as well as domestic cattle and sheep ranching. A 1999 inventory by the Nature Conservancy found that the Powder River in Wyoming supported the most intact assemblage of fish species, including the sturgeon chub, which is being evaluated for federal protection.

In Montana, the BLM and the state also are conducting an environmental impact statement on coal bed methane development. A draft document is expected by the end of the year. Concerns about Wyoming's discharges into the Powder River degrading downstream conditions in Montana led to the two states agreeing to try to address the issue.

America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2001 by American Rivers

1. Missouri River (Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri). Several species – the pallid sturgeon, least tern and piping plover – face extinction because the operation of six federal dams prevents the natural rise and fall of water levels in order to assist with downstream barge traffic.

2. Canning River (Arctic National Wildlife Refuge,

Alaska). High energy prices have renewed the oil industry's desire to expand from Prudhoe Bay oil fields, across the Canning River, and into the refuge to drill for crude oil and gas.

3. Eel River (California). Once among California's most productive salmon rivers, the Eel River has been reduced to a trickle to generate a small amount of electricity and to supply a neighboring river valley with water.

4. Hudson River (New York). Two General Electric plants released more than a million pounds of toxic PCBs into the Hudson River over a 30-year period.

5. Powder River (Wyoming and Montana). The booming coal bed methane industry in the Powder River Basin in both states creates large quantities of mostly poor quality ground water. Discharges may affect the river and its tributaries.

6. Mississippi River (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana). Two large flood control projects proposed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers along the river and its tributaries would destroy more than 200,000 acres of rare flood plain wetlands.

7. Big Sandy River (West Virginia and Kentucky). Last October, the bottom of a large coal slurry impoundment in Kentucky cracked, sending 250 million tons of water, mud and coal waste surging into the Tug Fork of the Big Sandy River. The event killed all river life in more than 75 miles of stream.

8. Snoqualmie River (Washington). Sprawling development threatens the future of the Snoqualmie, which produces some of the largest salmon runs in the state.

9. Animas River (Colorado and New Mexico). The Animas-La Plata water project threatens endangered fish species, a thriving recreational rafting industry, riverbank wetlands and a trout fishery.

10. East Fork Lewis (Washington). A proposed 4,000 tons a day gravel mine expansion threatens crucial spawning and rearing habitat for three species of salmon that are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.